

THANKSGIVING . . . 1898

By Gershom Bradford

It was historic - that holiday weekend. Relatives and friends of the coastal belt of Massachusetts gathered and dined in the traditional manner. The weather was favorable. Saturday was the loveliest of late Indian summer days. In the late afternoon it became overcast, by early evening it was snowing and the wind rising rapidly from the notheast. There were few who could sleep through the furious blizzard winds that raged after midnight.

Conditions eased in the forenoon and people emerged to a scene of staggering destruction. Communications were destroyed; trains, if any, were 10 hours late. The ledges and beaches in the approaches to Boston were piled with wreckage among which were seamen's bodies. At North Scituate a pilot schooner was lost with all hands, so too a fishing schooner at Marshfield. The North River's mouth had been changed 2 miles to the north; there was 6 feet of water at low water where houses were standing the evening before. The South Shore railroad was washed out on the marshes of North River. After being restored I saw the old track standing vertically like a giant fence, held erect by 2 telegraph poles. At Green Harbor Beach substantial porches were blown from the houses. All the fishing schooners that had sought shelter in the coveyard had parted their chains. Only one vessel on the whole coast was safely riding to her anchors in the upper Boston Harbor - the Lavinia Snow. Over 20 houses were swept from Plymouth Beach. El River, normally discharging into Warrens Cove, was flowing into the marshes.

At sea the steamer Portland was overdue with carrying Thanksgiving passengers home to Maine; the famous old steamer Pentagoet was lost off Cape Cod; schooners were dismantled and beaten up; sea-going tugs came straggling in without their barges.

Why was this storm so violent and why so little warning?

Perhaps it was detected early by only 2 men in the Boston area. At the Blue Hill Observatory, Dr. Charles Brooks saw something unusual in the upper air. I believe it was the advancing cirrus veil which is composed of ice crystals at about 50,000 feet in height. It is a hint, the outrider of a storm, usually moving forward at 10-15 miles an hour. But in 1898 it was advancing at the unprecedented rate of 40 miles and alerted Dr. Brooks. He telephoned agencies, but there was no radio to warn the shipping.

The other suspicious person who mistrusted the beautiful day was an observant mariner. Let us review what happened there: A small harbor tug was heading far offshore in a smooth sea and light breeze. The hands were sitting about the deck in their shirt sleeves; the barometer was a normal 30 inches. A large 4-master was their objective. Aboard her there was an air of serenity; the crew jolling about

and the master appeared care-free. He replied to a hail: "No, Jim, tomorrow is Sunday. I might as well be here as tied up in the Mystic." How little he knew that in 12 hours he would be in another Mystic.

The tug turned its attention to a 3-master some 3 miles away. The crew was puzzled by the excessive activity aboard the Lavinia Snow. When hailed, her skipper shouted to get him out of there quick; he evidently detected the fast flying cirrus that Dr. Brooks had noted. But why was it coming so fast?

An unusual weather situation had taken place to the south. Off Hatteras an ordinary storm had moved northward, while at the same time another routine disturbance was moving across the Mid-western states on a collision course. Somewhere off the Maryland coast these storms merged creating a low depression with hurricane winds and a speed forward of unprecedented 40 miles an hour.

Shortly after the storm passed I visited Rexhame to see the wreckage of the Mertis Perry. She was a melancholy sight as all wrecks are. There was a piece of canvas dragging overside in the surf, a grim reminder of the last struggle to survive - the remains of the triple-reefed foresail. Those fishing and pilot schooners could lie-to with reasonable safety in heavy weather under the reefed foresail, but they must have sea-room for they would make leeway. If they could carry the fore-staysail (Jumbo) they could work to windward, or at least, hold their own. There with the Perry and the pilot schooner their fore-staysail had probably blown away and they could not "claw off."

In the next June I was convalescing at the Boston City Hospital and became acquainted with a patient whose home was in the general area. One of his neighbors was the Bragdin family. Two of the grown sons were fishermen. The family had had a happy gathering for Thanksgiving and either Thursday or Friday evening about 10:30 the 2 boys got restless as their schooner was sailing about 2 a.m. "Jim, I guess we gotta go." "Yes, George, but this is the first time I don't want to go." "Strange, Jim, I feel that way, too."

But they gathered up their ruds, bade the gathered family goodbye - for good. Sunday they were lost in the Mertis Perry.

A cousin, who is a scientist, was visiting me recently. We were discussing the great storm of 1898. He told me that in the spring of 1899 when the herring were returning to spawn up Eel River, they found the stream gone and ran up on the new beach and died. Their remarkable navigating instinct had not been informed of the change. There is something pathetic about this. That is, if you can feel sorry for a fish.

For 77 years, after each severe notheast, I have heard that it was as bad as 1898. With all I saw and heard, I cannot believe it.